

Gestures of Love
John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Maundy Thursday, April 24, 2005

I am learning that when a loved one dies, it is often the little gestures of love that we miss the most, the simple actions that were an expression of a larger, deeper love. For example, my mom used to send us news clippings: comics that reflected a personal experience, articles on parenting (in case we needed advice), and personal interest articles about people I knew while growing up in my hometown. She would send e-mails once or twice or more a week. The mailboxes around our house are less full these days, but I appreciate those gestures of love even more now.

In his final evening with his disciples, his extended family, if you will, Jesus offers several gestures of love that would live on in their memories, even gestures that they can enact again and again so that they can feel his presence with them.

That night Jesus shares the Passover meal with his followers. The meal itself is a ritual of remembrance. Annually the Hebrew people remember the great acts of God which led to their deliverance from slavery. The various foods unique to that meal help the people remember the bitterness of slavery and the joy of freedom. As the Jewish people celebrate the Passover feast, they experience the mighty acts of God once again.

In the culture of the Middle East, sharing a meal together is a time of forging bonds of kinship and alliance. "Breaking bread" is a time of building relationships. It may even be that the sacrifices common in the Hebrew worship of God were means of cementing relationship with God by sharing a "meal" with God. In times of communal feasts in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is often noted that God is present. Even today, we continue to express the gesture of inviting to a meal someone whom we would like to get to know better.

During the meal that night, Jesus interrupted the traditional ritual with two unique additions. He took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take eat, this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Bread holds great symbolism for the Hebrew people. It is reminiscent of the manna provided daily by God in the wilderness while the people journeyed to the Promised Land. The sanctuary where sacrifices are made held a table for the Bread of Presence, placed in front of the Holy of Holies. Fresh loaves of bread are brought into the sanctuary every Sabbath; the old

loaves are eaten by the priests in a holy place. Not much more is known about the symbolism of the bread of presence, but in some sense it is sacramental, as if it seals the relationship between God and the people.¹

Now Jesus is giving new meaning to the symbol of bread. He uses a common everyday item so that people throughout the ages will remember his gesture of love. The act of breaking the bread represents the death he was soon to suffer. The act of giving the bread to eat is a way of expressing his enduring love for his disciples, even for those who would betray and deny him. The bread we bless, break, share, and eat is Jesus' gesture of love.

At the conclusion of the supper Jesus takes a cup, blesses it, and gives it to his disciples, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Again, Jesus takes an object rich in symbolism and gives it new meaning. In the sacrifices of the ancient days, blood was applied to sacred objects to set them apart as symbols of divine presence and power. The blood of offerings was used to purify and sanctify. Blood also symbolizes life, a holy gift of God. The use of blood in religious rituals is a way of cleansing, making holy and restoring life. In being purified, one can then be given access to God.²

In his death, Jesus' life is given and his blood is shed. Based on the Hebrew understanding of the cleansing power of blood, Jesus' death has been interpreted as a means of purifying humans of sin and restoring us to right relationship with God. It ratifies a new covenant with God.

Thus, when Jesus invites us to drink his blood, he offers us a cleansing, life-giving, renewing power to restore our relationship with God. "This is my blood of the covenant" – a gesture of forgiveness and everlasting love.

Footwashing is a regular social custom in Jesus' day. When a visitor arrives after a long journey, a slave takes the guest to a room where a bath is prepared. If the traveler has come a short distance, the slave unfastens the guest's sandals and washes his feet as he relaxes and dines at the table with his host.

Footwashing is the duty of the servant. This evening Jesus takes on the role of the servant. He isn't afraid to get his hands dirty from the dusty feet, to breathe in the odor of sweat, to gently caress aching tired feet. He isn't so great that he can't take on the humble, lowly task of washing the feet

of his guests. Yet ironically, it is just this self-denying humility that makes him great.

Washing the feet of his friends is a gesture that seals Jesus' presence and love in the hearts and memories of his disciples forever.

A shared meal, broken bread, a cup of life-giving blood, the intimate washing of dirty feet – these are the gestures of love Jesus shares with his friends on the last night of his life. They are gestures that speak of his profound love for them, a love that abides even after his death. They are acts repeated throughout time as a means of renewing the presence of Christ in our lives.

Gestures of love, my friends, given for you that Christ might live in you today. Amen.

¹ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, George A. Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 464.

² *Ibid.*, Supplementary Volume, pp. 114-117.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church